

Big wind turbines on towers over 400 feet tall are going up north and west of the ranch. Marks the first time herders have broke even on the wind, much less been paid for the wind.

By ignoring the cost and the risk, we have depended on windmills for a century to stock dry grassland. We'd all have been better off if we had done about anything else, from selling livestock minerals for creepy cattle to promoting encyclopedias to punish mean kids. It would have been better if we had left the lands idle where water had to lifted, drifting onto them in rainy seasons, the way of the buffalo.

All the early German land grants in Texas joined or accessed the rivers by deeded rights and easements. But oh, no, as soon as the Teutonic blood thinned in my clan's veins, we raced to the shortgrass country to graze cheap, strong grass with plenty of space. "Plenty of space," sad to learn, not only above ground, but underneath the ground to find water.

Biggest joke up on the Divide was claiming the wind was harnessed. Sure was. It was and is harnessed if the definition includes part of the barn roof landing in the horse trap from a March twister that wrapped the windmill's

wheel around the stem of the tower and left my mother and stepdad a dry camp with nowhere to store a sack of chicken feed, much less keep cow cake.

Down at the old ranch house, set at the flood plain level of Spring Creek Draw, the strongest air current all summer came from the whistle of the trains passing the railroad crossing. Up here on the Divide, it was black whirlwinds spinning across pastures lost to winter wildfires.

The situation became much better upon the stringing of REA lines in the 1950s to water wells, not to mention lighting ranch houses after dark and putting such marvelous inventions as automatic washing machines sloshing away on the back porch.

But none of this matches the magnitude of the hombres north of us selling the winds to corporations that claim erecting the giant towers and turbines is going to provide cheap, clean energy. Two of my compadres are already leasing the wind rights on their ranches.

The come-on claims the turbines on the whole project of several landowners will provide electricity for 120,000 to 130,000 homes, clean energy without as much soot entering the atmosphere as the ashes flipped from one filter tip cigarette or the carbon flicked off the head of

a penny matchstick. (Hold steady; I am exaggerating the last part of this.)

The action is hard to follow, being so new. No one has said at our meetings on Tuesdays or in the news coverage whether whirlwind profit taxes are developing in Washington or a free air society in Austin is going to protest private ownership of the altitudes up to the stratosphere and denounce propellers damaging the wind.

Depletion, also, is too sensitive to discuss around the ones of us downwind from the farms. The Texas Railroad Commission regulates the state's petroleum industry. Seems the FAA carries the big stick over private aviation and airlines. Surely the State will need to set up an agency to regulate the winds.

All my wind power experience goes back to Depression days, when wind chargers powered six-volt car batteries for a radio and dim lights for the ranch house. In those lean years, the wind was probably under the auspices of the Production Credit or Land Bank, like everything else on ranches. A "wind charger" consisted of a generator powered by a wooden propeller turned into the wind by a small tail. Mounted on a joint of pipe or a tower, these little contraptions kept us in radio range of the outside world.

At the end of February, the turbines must have been shut down, as a north wind hit strong enough to windrow molasses tubs against the fences. We were inside the barn, hunting a short in the wiring on the feed wagon's feeder at the first blast. Currents became so fierce, the wiring made contact while whipping around under the bed of the truck.

The cowboy underneath the truck bed began hollering. Sounded like he was saying, "Let off the switch." Actually, he panicked with all that tin flopping, and was saying, "We better get" ... then something sounding like "switch." We did retreat after tin began peeling off the strongest wall of the saddle shed and dropping lead-headed roofing nails now and then on the top of the feed wagon.

March winds laid eerily quiet. I keep expecting empty air pockets floating around, indicating the turbines are sucking or diverting the wind. Hard not to be jealous of herders in the meantime lucky enough to take in such easy dough. The ones of us downwind can just hope we don't run out of water or suffocate once a natural or artificial summer calm hits out here.